

# Virginia Gardening

*with Jim May*

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## **Add interest to your winter landscape with a few of these Virginia-grown trees and shrubs** **By Jim May**

Winter landscapes can look kind of gray and dull, but they don't have to. Take a stroll around your yard this winter and see where a tree or shrub with a different shape, peeling bark, berries or twig color could brighten the winter landscape and add some seasonal interest.

Trees that have berries, exfoliating bark or an interesting form or branching pattern can make a dramatic statement against the winter sky. The London planetree (*Platanus x acerfolia*) has a medium coarse texture and is superb in winter when its exfoliating, mottled bark stands out. The ginkgo tree (*Ginkgo biloba*) starts out rather gaunt and gangly, but if we are patient, develops into one of the most spectacular of trees. The green hawthorn (*Crataegus viridis* 'Winter King'), with its rounded shape and large red berries, is one of the handsomest of all hawthorns.

American hornbeam (*Carpinus caroliniana*), also called musclewood, ironwood and blue beech, is a native understory tree that reaches only 30 feet. The bark develops a slate gray, smooth, fluted appearance that makes it look like flexed muscle. Often mistaken for beech, this tree deserves more use in the home landscape, especially in a naturalized setting.

Corkscrew willow (*Salix matsudana* 'Tortuosa') brings an interesting architecture to the winter landscape with its gnarled and contorted gray-brown branches. Rather weak-wooded, this tree benefits from judicious pruning when young to create good structure by removing crowded branches and included bark.

Most Japanese maples (*Acer palmatum*) are grown for their leaf color or shape, but many have weeping or contorted branching. Paperbark maple (*A. griseum*) is a small (25') tree with outstanding orange-brown to cinnamon-brown exfoliating bark that creates year-round interest.

Lacebark elm (*Ulmus parvifolia*) is a graceful, round-headed tree whose bark is a mottled combination of gray, green, orange and brown that gets better with age.

The Franklin tree (*Franklinia alatamaha*) is a small (25') native that's beautiful all year and in winter displays its ridged gray bark with prominent white striations. Another native tree, the Carolina silverbell (*Halesia tetraptera*), has showy white lines on young stems and the bark develops a stringy peeling habit with maturity.

Weeping trees make beautiful winter specimens. They include weeping katsuratree (*Cercidiphyllum japonicum* 'Pendula') and weeping beech (*F. sylvatica* 'Pendula'), which is also available in a purple-leaved form aptly named 'Purple Fountain'. Don't forget flowering cherries like the weeping Higan (*Prunus subhirtella* 'Pendula') and weeping Yoshino cherry (*P. x yedoensis* 'Pendula').

There are many shrubs that add winter interest to the landscape. Climbing hydrangea (*Hydrangea anomala*) is a vigorous, woody vine with beautiful exfoliating bark and an interesting shape. Another vine, sweet autumn clematis (*Clematis terniflora*), blooms in late summer and has flower parts that persist through winter.

Kerria (*Kerria japonica*) is a little-used shrub that maintains its green twigs all winter, adding a little color to the landscape. Winter jasmine (*Jasminum nudiflorum*) is a shrub many people mistake for forsythia (*Forsythia x intermedia*) in the late winter landscape. From a distance, its yellow flowers are very similar. Bright green twigs and low, trailing growth habit are its greatest assets.

The native witch hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*) is a fall bloomer. I have always loved the understated beauty of its spidery, pale yellow flowers. This plant has been hybridized and many cultivars are available, adding to its appeal. The vernal witch hazel (*H. vernalis*) has many cultivars, as does *H. x intermedia*, a cross between the Chinese and Japanese varieties. These plants bloom in late January through March and display clear yellow to copper-colored flowers. This plant is very effective in a naturalized setting with native redbuds (*Cercis canadensis*) and flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*).

There are a large number of shrubs with berries that persist into the winter. The ones that come to mind quickly are the hollies. While not all hollies have berries, the blue hollies or Meserve hybrids (*I. X meserveae*) berry up nicely and are very popular. Chinese holly (*I. cornuta*) needs protection in the colder parts of the state and includes the popular cultivar 'Dwarf Burford'. Tree forms of holly include the cultivars Foster holly (*I. X attenuata* 'Fosteri') and 'Nellie R. Stevens'.

There is even a deciduous holly (*I. verticillata*) called winterberry for its bright red fruit that persist as long as the birds will allow. It is quite striking in the winter landscape.

Other plants with berries that persist through the winter include northern bayberry (*Myrica pensylvanica*), a deciduous to semi-evergreen shrub with gray, waxy berries popular with migrating tree swallows, warblers and Baltimore orioles in the early spring.

Pyracantha, or scarlet firethorn (*Pyracantha coccinea*), is a popular climber that is effective on buildings or arbors. The orange or red berries are profuse and persistent through the winter.

Not all winter-interest shrubs have berries. The dogwood family has several species widely planted for their twig color. Tatarian dogwood (*Cornus alba*) and Red Osier dogwood (*C. sericea*) are effective in the winter landscape as their newest growth has a bright red color. There is even a yellow variety (*C. sericea* 'Flaviramea'). All of these plants should have one-third of their oldest twigs pruned out each spring for best twig color.

Virginia is a diverse state and an amazing array of trees and shrubs can be grown here. Your local landscape company or garden center probably receives the annual "Guide to Virginia Growers", published by the Virginia Nursery and Landscape Association (VNLA). The 2006 guide is out and all the plants mentioned in this article are in it. Encourage your favorite nursery to buy from this guide and support Virginia agriculture.